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INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 000317

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FOR NEA/PPD, NEA/ELA AND DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/03/2020
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [SOCI](#) [JO](#)
SUBJECT: JORDAN: NEA DAS WITTES PRESSES FOR INCREASED
FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

REF: AMMAN 252

Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (S) Summary: In the wake of the Secretary's speech on Internet freedoms and a recent court decision subjecting Jordan's online media to the problematic Press and Publications law, NEA DAS Tamara Wittes met during her January 26-28 visit with the King's media advisor to discuss official actions affecting the media. DAS Wittes also hosted an on-the-record roundtable with five editors of online news sites and two bloggers, which received wide coverage in the electronic media. In both events, she pressed for the GOJ needs to take significant steps to guarantee freedom of expression (including in the press and on the Internet). End Summary.

King's Advisor on GOJ Approach to Media

¶2. (S) DAS Wittes met for 75 minutes on January 26 with media advisor Ayman Safadi to review the government's approach to the media. Safadi noted the presence of at least seven dailies, dozens of weeklies, and scores of onlines sites as proof of media freedoms here. He complained, however, of the unprofessionalism of Jordan's media and the ways in which government officials and journalists engage in corrupt practices for personal benefit. Safadi asserted that the King had instructed new PM Samir Al-Rifai in his letter of designation to clean up corrupt government practices, including relations with the media. "The King indicated that we need clear laws, clear legislation, and a code of conduct," Safadi said. "His Majesty is really committed this time."

¶3. (S) Safadi pointed out that the PM had responded to the King's instructions by issuing a "Code of Conduct" regulating the government's relationship with the media, which was announced at the end of December. The code specifically targeted corrupt practices by government officials who provided financial support to journalists in exchange for favorable coverage. In particular, it instructs ministries to brief reporters regularly, refrain from appointing journalists to a public department to avoid conflicts of interest, cancel subscriptions with all publications, only purchase media from newsstands, and adhere to new criteria regulating advertising.

¶4. (S) Safadi also discussed what he called the "unwelcome" decision by Jordan's highest court, the Court of Cassation, to place online media under the 1998 Press and Publications law, most recently amended in 2007 (reftel). Following an uproar by onlines over the decision, the PM's political advisor, Samih Al-Ma'ayitah, had reassured online representatives and bloggers that the government did not intend to apply the law and require them to register or face

a penalty of JD 5,000-10,000 (\$7,000-14,000) but that it would apply the law in its regulation of content. Despite problems with the current law, the government did not want to pass new legislation without a seated Parliament because "the optics wouldn't look right." The government did intend to pass within weeks a cyber crimes law that would supersede the Court of Cassation's ruling by specifically regulating online, Safadi asserted.

15. (S) The Minister of Information Technology and Communication was seeking input for the legislation from "stakeholders" to ensure that it met international best practices, he added. Safadi provided few details about the draft legislation's content except to say that it differed greatly from a version circulating online. DAS Wittes stressed the U.S. commitment to democracy and human rights, including freedom of expression regardless of the media, as laid out by two of the Secretary's recent speeches. Freedom of expression would be particularly important to Jordan as it entered a sensitive period when public debate would be essential to the soundness of a new electoral law and to encouraging wider public participation in the election of a new parliament, she said. DAS Wittes noted that the presence of several different laws regulating the media contributed to uncertainty about which laws applied and had a chilling effect on the freedom of expression.

Roundtable with Onlines

16. (C) Separately on January 27, DAS Wittes hosted a

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45-minute on-the-record roundtable with five editors of online news sites and two bloggers. She emphasized the U.S. commitment to democracy and human rights, freedom of expression--regardless of the medium--and the need for uncensored public debate over proposed election legislation and parliamentary elections. She also stressed that democratic change could not be imposed from outside but must come from the will of the people. Reporters asked about U.S. funding for civil society, proposed U.S. legislation to designate satellite channels as terrorist entities, whether the U.S. would help expand media freedoms in Jordan, and whether she had raised the right to free speech and a free press in her meetings. DAS Wittes elaborated on MEPI funding for civil society, including the \$5 million NET RFA, and explained that the HR2778 legislation had not become law and was not necessarily the view of the U.S. Administration. She also noted that she stressed to GOJ interlocutors the importance of freedom of expression regardless of the medium.

Subsequent domestic local reporting based on the discussion received positive, detailed coverage in many online, including some which did not have reporters at the roundtable. One website that did not attend the roundtable did carry a negative piece on January 28, opining that the "meeting" contributed to the impression that online had sought foreign support in their fight with the government.

Comment

17. (C) As stressed by DAS Wittes in meetings with GOJ officials and with others, the government needs to take significant steps to guarantee freedom of expression (including in the press and on the Internet), given the existence of numerous laws that go to extreme lengths to regulate media content, including Jordan's penal code of 1960, the Press and Publications law, State Security Court law, Protection of State Secrets and Documents Law, and the Contempt of Court Law. New legislation would ideally also give parties an appropriate legal means to pursue recourse for alleged slander, libel or defamation on the Internet, which is a legitimate phenomena identified by Safadi and even

by online editors themselves.

18. (U) DAS Wittes cleared this cable.
Beecroft